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C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 000184

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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA; NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WATERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/24/2017

TAGS: PREL KWBG PBTS KHUM KPAL IS

SUBJECT: EXCAVATIONS AND CONSTRUCTION NEAR HARAM AL SHARIF/TEMPLE MOUNT CAUSE CONCERN

CLASSIFIED BY: CONSUL GENERAL JAKE WALLES, PER REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) BEGIN SUMMARY. JERUSALEM ARCHAEOLOGISTS TOLD POLOFF JANUARY 26 THAT EXCAVATION AND CONSTRUCTION UNDER THE OHEL YITZHAK SYNAGOGUE IN THE MUSLIM QUARTER OF THE OLD CITY HAS BEEN HALTED, PENDING AN ISRAELI ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY (IAA) DECISION ABOUT A CRUSADER-ERA HALL BELOW THE SYNAGOGUE. THESE ARCHEOLOGISTS SAID THAT WHEN EXCAVATIONS RESUME, THEY WILL ONLY BE VERTICAL AND THAT HORIZONTAL EXCAVATIONS TOWARD THE WESTERN WALL AND THE HARAM AL SHARIF/TEMPLE MOUNT WILL BE PROHIBITED. PALESTINIAN CONCERNS ABOUT EXCAVATION HAVE ALREADY SURFACED, APPARENTLY SPARKED BY A JANUARY 24 HA'ARETZ STORY. PLC MEMBER FROM JERUSALEM, BERNARD SABELLA, WROTE THE CONSUL GENERAL JANUARY 25 TO EXPRESS CONCERN. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) POLOFF MET JANUARY 26 WITH DANNY SEIDEMANN, FOUNDER OF THE ISRAELI HUMAN RIGHTS NGO IR AMIM, AND DR. RAFI GREENBERG, A TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY ARCHAEOLOGIST, AND GIDON SULEIMAN, AN IAA ARCHAEOLOGIST. THEY CONFIRMED THAT ATERET COHANIM IS SPONSORING VERTICAL EXCAVATIONS BELOW THE OHEL YITZHAK SYNAGOGUE. (NOTE: THE SYNAGOGUE WAS ABANDONED IN 1936 DURING THE ARAB REVOLT. IT IS LOCATED AT THE EDGE OF THE MUSLIM QUARTER. THE WESTERN WALL PLAZA IS ABOUT 20 METERS TO THE SOUTH AND THE HARAM AL-SHARIF/TEMPLE MOUNT IS ABOUT 80 METERS TO THE EAST. ATERET COHANIM, AN ORGANIZATION WITH THE STATED GOAL OF PROMOTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF JEWISH SITES IN THE OLD CITY, IS RESTORING THE SYNAGOGUE.) SULEIMAN SAID THE EXCAVATIONS WERE HALTED WHILE THE IAA DETERMINES WHETHER TO ALLOW EXCAVATIONS TO CONTINUE PAST A 13TH CENTURY CRUSADER HALL LOCATED BENEATH THE SYNAGOGUE. HE SAID THAT HORIZONTAL EXCAVATIONS WERE NOT AUTHORIZED, AND EXCAVATIONS TO CLEAR FORMERLY OPEN SPACES; I.E., ROOMS, WERE NOT INTENDED TO TUNNEL TOWARDS THE WESTERN WALL.

¶3. (C) GREENBERG SAID ATERET COHANIM ARE INTERESTED IN CONSTRUCTING TUNNELS TOWARDS THE WESTERN WALL TO CREATE AN AUTONOMOUS JEWISH NETWORK OF MOVEMENT BENEATH THE CITY. HE SAID THE CURRENT EXCAVATIONS, HOWEVER, ARE UNLIKELY TO ADVANCE THAT GOAL. GREENBERG AND SULEIMAN SAID PAST EXCAVATIONS DAMAGED THE STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY OF THE HOMES ABOVE THE TUNNELS, AND SEIDEMANN SAID NONE OF THE PALESTINIAN HOMEOWNERS GRANTED PERMISSION TO EXCAVATE BENEATH THEIR HOMES. SULEIMAN SAID THAT ANY EXCAVATIONS TOO CLOSE TO THE HARAM AL SHARIF/TEMPLE MOUNT WOULD RISK DAMAGING THE STRUCTURE, BUT HE DOES NOT THINK THE ATERET COHANIM WILL UNDERTAKE SUCH EXCAVATIONS FOR NOW. HE EXPRESSED CONCERN, HOWEVER, THAT THE HEIGHT OF THE SYNAGOGUE WHEN RESTORED WILL BE EQUAL IN HEIGHT TO THE WESTERN WALL AND TO THE HARAM AL SHARIF/TEMPLE MOUNT AND THAT THIS COULD EXACERBATE TENSIONS.

¶4. (C) PALESTINIANS ARE ALREADY EXPRESSING CONCERN ABOUT THE EXCAVATIONS. PLC MEMBER BERNARD SABELLA WROTE THE CONSUL GENERAL JANUARY 25 STATING HIS CONCERNS THAT THE EXCAVATIONS AND CONSTRUCTION AT THE OHEL YITZHAK SYNAGOGUE THREATEN THE

AL AQSA MOSQUE. SABELLA SAID HE VISITED THE EXCAVATIONS AFTER A JANUARY 24 HA'ARETZ ARTICLE ON THE SYNAGOGUE. HE WROTE THAT THE IAA IS EXCAVATING ON BEHALF OF THE ATERET COHANIM AND THAT EXCAVATIONS HAVE PROCEEDED HORIZONTALLY AND VERTICALLY, ADVANCING 20 METERS TOWARDS THE HARAM AL SHARIF/TEMPLE MOUNT AND WITH THE GOAL OF CREATING A TUNNEL TO THE WESTERN WALL. SABELLA EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE POTENTIAL DAMAGE TO THE AL AQSA MOSQUE AND TO THE PALESTINIAN-OWNED HOMES ABOVE THE TUNNEL. (COMMENT: POLOFF'S VISIT TO THE EXCAVATION SITE AND CONVERSATIONS WITH THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS SUGGEST THAT SABELLA IS OVERSTATING THE IMMEDIATE THREAT OF THE WORK AT THE OHEL YITZHAK SYNAGOGUE, BUT PALESTINIANS WILL SHARE HIS REACTIONS AND FEARS OF INTERFERENCE AT THE HARAM AL SHARIF/TEMPLE MOUNT, EXACERBATING CURRENT TENSIONS. END COMMENT.)

WALLES